

From the Back Porch of the Church

by Jerry R. Wright

After more than a half century within the walls of the institutional Church, half of those as an ordained Presbyterian minister, I now find myself on the back-porch of the Church. Here I sit in my rocking chair, listening, chatting, and watching. I look out and scan the horizon for new life-giving images which the deep unconscious may be offering the growing number of people who no longer look to the Church for their primary soul sustenance.

From my back-porch vantage point, I occasionally look nostalgically into Her windows, and often I am invited to offer lectures and workshops by groups who meet within Her hospitable walls. Occasionally I still perform the functions of an ordained minister, which requires arduous inner work in the moment to re-interpret and re-image much of the Church's liturgy and language. For example, if I am asked to share the bread and wine of the Eucharist, it is sufficient for me to share them as the "Life of The Christ" (within and among us), rather than as the body and blood of Jesus.

As a Jungian analyst in private practice, some of the people who meet me on the porch still find life in the institutional Church vital to their soul, as it was for me well into my middle years. Others still occupy a pew but find the religious institution rather dull or irrelevant; still others are very agitated, or sad, and would like to leave but do not know where to find the bread for which they hunger. Still others who seek me out for analytic work have never darkened the doors of a church, and some come from other religious or spiritual traditions. I talk with those who believe in God, or not, but who have a deep longing for something More. Each and all are welcome on the back-porch and each has a very important spiritual story, though many prefer the language of modern depth psychology

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to tell it.

I like it here on the back-porch. At an earlier time, I might have said that this is "where God has called me." Now I am content to claim that I am here by a combination of wise and not-so-wise choices (both by me and the Church), fate, and multiple mysterious life threads which have been woven by an Invisible Hand. Life has become too large to reduce to simple formulas, religious clichés, or well-crafted creeds.

From the back-porch I can see the "shadow of the Church," so to speak, more clearly. Carl Jung reminds us that the individual and collective shadow can be very destructive or, with consciousness, a potential goldmine. When the Church refuses or neglects the work of consciousness, it becomes a "sanctuary for shadow," a safe haven for intellectual laziness, and unexamined prejudices and fears. Xenophobia (fear of those who are different) and homophobia are the most obvious contemporary culprits. With the arduous, courageous work of consciousness, however, much treasure awaits the individual or Church. The remainder of this article is an attempt to mine some of that gold.

From the shadow of the Church, I am closer to nature and to her wisdom from which the Church has been separated for centuries while promoting the split between spirit and matter. When we look closely enough, nature teaches us everything we need to know about life and death, about the relationship between the Creator and the created, and about trust. Nature is faithful to her rhythms, she is the great recycler, and she bows to her Source. We would do well to learn

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from her, as the poet Rilke, employing the metaphor of “Storm” for God, writes:

*What we choose to fight is so tiny!
What fights us is so great!
If only we would let ourselves be dominated
As (nature does) by some immense Storm,
we would become strong too...*

Nature contains all the feminine wisdom we human beings will ever need, if we can give up the patriarchal notion that we are superior to her and have a divine right to subdue and consume her. Unfortunately, this is one right we have practiced all too well. The Church has yet to recover from its patriarchal, hierarchical notion that we are above nature. Slowly nature is teaching us our rightful place within and alongside her; even more accurately, as a part of her.

Being on the back-porch grants me some distance to see my own Christian faith tradition more objectively, including its profound symbolic truths, as well as its shameful errors and failures. Symbolically, the Church’s guiding documents (Bible, Doctrines, Creeds) remain a treasure trove; unfortunately, the treasure has been pillaged over the centuries by a combination of iconoclasm, rationalism, and literalism.

As a child, reared in what Marcus Borg and others call the “earlier paradigm,” I was taught that the words and stories of the Bible were literally true, and when the Bible and science were in conflict, the latter had to be set aside or explained away. I was taught that my deepest nature was opposed to God, rather than being of God, and that God was a kind of remote Monarch who required the literal blood sacrifice of his Son as a payment for my sinful nature. Jesus was presented as the only path to God and all other paths led to a very hot place in eternity. The Christian religion was presented as being superior to all others, and we had a divine obligation to convert all the heathens to our way of thinking and believing; that is, to embrace our God-image. Even as a little boy I knew there was something wrong with that picture, but I dared not question it as week after week it was reinforced by my church fathers and mothers. However, when one is required to close off one’s mind, it is a short distance to becoming “close-minded” and exclusive. Regrettably, some version of this paradigm remains the primary perspective within the walls of the Church.

The exclusive claim to truth remains Christianity’s (as well as other monotheistic religions) greatest embarrassment and illusion and, psychologically, the most glaring pathology. It grows out of arrogance and fear and the narcissistic need to be special by claiming that our tribe is superior to all other religious tribes. It is a mass neurosis wrapped in religious piety and pithy Biblical underpinnings.

Speaking from within the Christian tribe, and from the Church’s shadow, as long as Christianity and the Church retain the illusion of being superior, that we have some exclusive corner on the truth, or that believing in Jesus is the only path to God, we will contribute, knowingly and unknowingly,



Photo, *Breakthrough*, Don Huntley

to division, hatred, violence, and terror in our world! The same needs to be said about fundamentalists of all stripes whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. This narcissistic need to be special, and to possess God with our words and images (a clear form of idolatry), has contributed to enormous bloodshed over the centuries and continues to do so to the present moment.

At a recent conference where we were exploring some of these perspectives, a college professor of world religions made the frightening observation that of the nine major world religions, only Christianity and Islam actively seek to convert others to their way of believing. Both claim a divine imperative to evangelize the world, to impose their God-image on all others. Our present wars and numerous religious conflicts simmering around our small planet, as well as the bloodshed over the centuries in the name of God, underscore the power of religion and its perversity.

From the back-porch of the Church, it has become clear to me that there are no “chosen people” in the sense of having an “in” with the Divine Mystery. God does not have a favorite tribe, or country, or political party, nor is God captured in any one set of doctrines or creeds. There are no sacred texts which can claim to be the truth, including the Bible. The Bible is the Church’s story of God, not God’s story of the Church as the Church has claimed from the fourth century.

The early Church Fathers employed a very convenient marketing device: they proposed the only solution (sacrificial blood of Jesus) to a universal problem (original sin); then added the claim that their interpretations and perspectives were divine revelation; and, finally, closed the canon of sacred texts which seemed to support their claims. This unfortunate version of the Christian story was then wed to the imperial powers committed to empire building which resulted in enormous bloodshed in the name of God. The Church does not like to visit its shadowy past and is, therefore, bent on repeating it, albeit in more sophisticated forms. Rather than claiming exclusive truth about the Invisible Mystery we know as God, we need to adopt the attitude that other religious traditions and perspectives aid the Church in coming to a more complete God-image. That alone would be the Church’s best contribution to peacemaking and far

more effective than papal decrees and theological papers emanating from church assemblies.

Of course, these perspectives will be considered by many to be heretical—and they are! Heresy is simply, and profoundly, one of a pair of opposite truths which was discarded by the Church Fathers in favor of the other opposite which came to be known as orthodoxy. Heresy often contains truth which could not be metabolized by the collective religious digestive tract of an earlier time, and was repressed and suppressed, often with much violence and death to those who held such views. The blood of many so-called heretics, witches, and heathens remains under the clean carpet of the Church collective. An observation from Steven Weinberg speaks a tragic truth: *With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.*

The voices of heretics in religious/spiritual traditions are very important because they announce what is not permitted by the collective mindset. From this perspective, Jesus of Nazareth would be considered a heretic by both the religious and political establishment of his day, and speaking his truth cost him a great deal.

Fortunately, from a depth psychological perspective, when a splitting process is employed by an immature ego which requires something to be pushed out of consciousness, the repressed material does not disappear but reforms and makes another incursion into consciousness at a later time. Many so-called heresies are rearing their heads, asking to be honored, which could provide the Church with the theological balance, and humility, it sorely needs.

In my more creative moments on the back-porch, when I can let go of my arrogant notion that I have to “save the Church” (my residual religious complexes), I simply wait and watch what is happening out back and in the larger world. I wait and watch with the question playing around the edges of my mind and soul, “I wonder what the Self is up to?” (I generally prefer the designation of the archetypal “Self” which is more difficult to literalize and domesticate, not associated with gender, not limited to any one religious tradition, and does not carry all the centuries of worn-out God-talk). I ask, *what may be emerging from the deep unconscious that is trying to get the attention of individuals, religious groups, and nations? What new images are already emerging which may give us a clue to the tectonic shift that is taking place in the deep unconscious, a shift which we feel in our bones, in our souls, in our pocket-books, in our nation and world? And how might I/we cooperate with the new life that is trying to emerge? In more traditional religious language, how might I/we move from being “children of God,” which keeps us dependent and little, to being “adults with God” or “partners with God,” which requires much more responsibility, creativity, and trust?*

In my more hopeful moments, I remember that we do not create the images which are the carriers of new life. Life-giving and life-sustaining images have and will continue to seek us out from the archetypal depths. They are the embedded symbols in our religious traditions and sacred texts. They reach out to us in ancient stories and myths and in the new stories which are being written. They are being projected onto the screens of our nighttime dreams and our daytime fantasies, onto the events of our outer world, onto the faces of those we love, and hate. New

images arise spontaneously in our culture and all the cultures of the world and are articulated by our artists, authors, poets, and screen-writers. The ego does not create the images which are carriers of new life, but the receptive individual and collective ego appear to be vital vessels through which transpersonal energies desire to become incarnated.

Watching the social/political landscape, for example, I wonder what images are playing out before us that have emerged from the archetypal depths which beg our more conscious attention and integration. Could it be that in the Obama phenomena we get glimpses of the Archetype of Integration, or the Archetype of the Middle Way, both of which are sorely needed if we are to survive the splits and divisions within our individual and collective lives and souls? In addition to the gifts which Barack Obama may possess, he is also an image, an image of neither black nor white, but both, and his stated goal is to steer a middle path. Beyond the political question of the merits of his policies, might it be that in the wisdom of the Self we have before us an image which could be life-giving, and potentially world-saving, if we can allow it to do its work within and among us?

Finally, I am a child of the Church. She birthed me and mothered me, and Father God directed my earlier paths, and I could no more deny my religious parentage than I could my biological parents. The Christian myth is in my bones and bloodstream, and my soul will always bear its stamp. The Church provided me a sense of community and belonging, taught me the stories of the Bible, and the great hymns whose tunes still resonate within my soul and lift my spirit. However, my images of God, Jesus, the Church, and what it means to be a spiritual being, continue to evolve and I hope they will continue to do so.

I am indebted to the depth psychology of Carl Jung, as well as to the Celtic spiritual tradition, which released me from some of the intellectual and spiritual prisons of my earlier heritage. What attracted me to Jung was his attempt to revive the old symbols and images which had become literalized and rigidified and solidified in dogma and doctrine, and his passion for melting them down and pouring new meanings into the old forms. In his Terry Lectures of 1937 at Yale University, he said:

I am not...addressing myself to the happy possessors of faith, but to those many people for whom the light has gone out, the mystery has faded, and God is dead. For most of them there is no going back, and one does not know either whether going back is always the better way. To gain an understanding of religious matters, probably all that is left us today is the psychological approach. That is why I take these thought-forms that have become historically fixed, try to melt them down again and pour them into moulds of immediate experience. (CW:11:par 148)

My version of that address, as I sit on the back-porch of the Church, is: *I am not addressing those for whom the traditional interpretations of the Christian story remain vital and life-giving, but to the growing number of those for whom the old, old story has been so literalized that it has lost its power to stir and feed the soul; those for whom the creeds no longer roll easily off the tongue; those who hunger and thirst for God who has innumerable names, and unlimited manifestations, a God to whom all can bow and none can possess.*